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ABSTRACT

Excessive quantification is becoming the new pollutant in the informational environment, with society encouraging the growing trend toward assessing values through numbers. As can be seen in one edition of the "Detroit News," articles ranging from brief stories to in-depth pieces rely heavily on numbers to convey messages and to establish significance. Unfortunately, in education emphasis is increasingly being placed on accountability through measurement so that if the quantification urge outside the education field continues unchecked, teaching performance is likely to become just another statistic. In teaching literature, engagement is the first step from which follow skills, tastes, attitudes, and creativity--not accountability. (JM)

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Henry B. Maloney

Accountability Revisited

One day last week, the following story appeared on the first page of the Detroit News* under the ironic headline "Tax Dollars at Work".

> LANSING--Taxpayers of Michigan:
>
> If you were told the State Senate spent $100 of your tax money to buy 10 walnut wastebaskets, would you be angry?
>
> If you found out you paid $123 for a lunch at which bureaucrats and legislators got together to talk about hearing-aid legislation, would you be upset?
>
> And if you learned that several state Court of Appeals judges paid out $312 recently to maintain and buy new plants for their suites, would it bother you?
>
> Well, get angry, upset and bothered because all of those things and more took place in the last three months, according to state records.

Although the average reader might not have noticed that this article deals with accountability, I am sure that you people can recognize that it does. It suggests that performances of public officials be evaluated by vaguely related data that can be quantified, and that certainly is one form of accountability. The article implies further that taxpayers are being exploited by the present system, and that too is one of the appeals set forth by those who are attempting to make our work fit into accountability formulas. I must say to you that I hold no brief for the scoundrels in

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*All Detroit News citations are from the March 24, 1975, edition.

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Lansing who are squandering my income tax, sales tax, gasoline tax, property tax, and other assorted taxes on items such as plants and walnut waste baskets, but becoming aware of that information is not what disturbs me most about this article. What really concerns me is that this news story is one more addition to an information environment that strongly supports evaluation of a performance, an event, a person, or even a place through quantification. I maintain that if our society encourages this growing trend toward assessing values through numbers, sometimes with dollar signs and sometimes not, teachers will find it most difficult to fend off those who wish to evaluate their performance with variously calibrated measuring instruments. If the present momentum continues this movement can lead to a very unfortunate situation because it immediately produces wrong answers to two of the key questions about accountability: Accountability for what? and accountability to whom? The answer to for what? becomes for whatever those in authority perceive as measurable, and the answer to to whom? is simply to those who are doing the measuring. Let me try to illustrate some ways in which excessive quantification is becoming the new pollutant in the informational environment.

The sports world, as sports writers grandiosely refer to their area of interest, has always been a world built on numbers. To the sports buff it is not relevant whether a player is a delightful person or a manic compulsive. What counts is whether he is capable of 40 home runs or

25 touchdown passes in a single season. If you happened to watch the UCLA-Kentucky Championship basketball game Monday night, you may have noticed how a human comment was quickly upstaged by a statistic. Throughout the game players had been identified by the usual quantifiable information such as height, points scored, average from the free throw line, years in school, and the like. So the announcer's comment that the father of one of the Kentucky players had traveled to San Diego to see his son play came through as a refreshingly personal observation. However, viewers were soon advised that the son's team had won all 26 of the games the father had attended and lost the 4 he had not seen. So the father's presence became a mere peg on which to hang yet another statistic and blow a little more quantification into the mass of information that we celebrate each day.

Although the form of accountability which focuses almost exclusively on measurement of performance is somewhat offensive, to most of us the idea of accountability is neither new nor necessarily threatening in itself. Those of you who go back to a time when you were held responsible for preparing lesson plans according to a strict, not-to-be-deviated-from outline, and those who have been obliged to "cover" a specified number of pages in a literature textbook probably sensed that you were accountable for achieving these goals even though the term itself may not have been used. There were criticisms of your work and perhaps sanctions if you didn't complete these jobs successfully. By 1970, when the NCTE booklet "On Writing Behavioral Objectives for English," was published, one would

expect to find frequent mention of accountability, but in fact there are only a couple of oblique references in this publication. One is Alan Purves's expression of concern about the "influence of the anti-intellectual cost accountant" who is seeking to measure the "payoff" in English teaching. The other, in an article by James Moffett, warns against the "cost accounting administrators" who have linked themselves with behavioral scientists. So it is apparent that the seeds of accountability were sprouting in the field long before anyone gave a name to the plants.

Interestingly, once the term was used in education its meaning had to be circumscribed to fit the measurement motif. The dictionary advises us that being held accountable means being held responsible for what can be explained or justified. It seems that in education the emphasis is being directed so heavily toward measurable response that only this kind of outcome is explainable or justifiable. But let me go back to my thesis that at the present time one of the chief enemies lurks outside the field of education where there seems to be an almost insatiable urge to quantify data and reiterate that if this urge continues unchecked, teaching performance is likely to become just another statistic.

Keep in mind please the possibility that much of this quantified information tends to be bad news--in a 32 team playoff there are 31 losers and 1 winner. I must concede, however, that maybe this bad news attitude is really just a regional bias I bring from Detroit, a city along with Atlanta that the media like to describe on the basis of homicides per capita. At intervals along the two main expressways in Detroit are three huge signs

that vaguely resemble scoreboards. These signs, which advertise tires, record in electric digits the number of automobiles that have been manufactured thus far during the year. I'm sure some of you have seen them. In more affluent times, motorists on the expressways could watch the digits gallop along toward a total of eight million or more cars. This year, the numbers are creeping, recording an output of only 1,404,288 when I left the city yesterday. Obviously, this measureable outcome signifies a poor performance. And when these numbers slow down, the national economy slips, and less tax money becomes available for educational needs. The schools are forced to skimp more than they normally do. Unhappily, at a time when teachers should be held less accountable for doing a first rate job because they have been given larger classes and deprived of the resources and colleagues they need, they frequently become scapegoats. Disgruntled and insecure members of the community wonder why teachers who have a short work day, a 9 1/2 month year, and many holidays, get paid so handsomely. Why in the world do they have tenure, which gives them lifetime job security, when my husband has just been laid off? I would suggest to you that as the economy continues to sputter, we become more vulnerable to accountability formulas that seek to make us more productive by quantifying our performance. Certainly an unhealthy economy generates unrest and dissatisfaction with jobholders whose work appears to be "easy" to outsiders who are unfamiliar with its demands. A troubled economy also produces via the various media a new wave of unpleasant quantified information: unemployment up 2 percent over last

month; car output down 20 percent from first 10 days of month; welfare aid up 8 percent, and the like.

The economy problem will go away eventually we are told--perhaps in the last quarter--but until it does it seems to me it is strengthening the accountability movement.

For more evidence, that the non-educational world is mesmerized by numbers I'd like to turn back to the edition of the Detroit News that included the article I cited at the beginning of this talk. And let me demonstrate that the Detroit News is a paper of substance by remarking to you that it has the largest circulation of any evening newspaper in the country. It is a big production; therefore it's good. Now, keep in mind that in discussing this edition we are omitting the sports section, which exists in a quantitative world of its own, as I mentioned earlier. We are also excluding the advertising space, which takes up approximately 60 percent of the paper for number-based information.

With those exclusions, about two articles on each page that is more than half text include quantifiers in the first or second paragraph. They range from very brief stories such as an 8 line item on the 41 people who were arrested for attending a cock fight--the third such bust this year, to an in-depth piece on Tommy Orange (a pseudonym), who stole more than 500 cars in the last four years. Not all of these stories are local. The lead sentence in a wire service report from Washington reads as follows:

> Washington. Automatic price raises granted to electric and gas utility companies because of utilities'

> increased fuel bills cost consumers about $6.5 billion last year, more than all the rate increases granted in the previous 25 years, according to a professional survey.

Sometimes the human interest element is submerged in the numbers as in this opening sentence:

> Warren police and firemen today sought to determine the cause of a fire in a one-story brick ranch home that took the lives of a 57-year-old Warren building contractor and a 43-year-old Detroit woman yesterday.

And sometimes the human interest remains as in this letter to Dear Abby:

> I have been keeping company with a 44-year-old divorced man for three years. He has three daughters aged 13, 11, and 8 and feels it is all right for them to sleep with him until the age of 10 or 11. I don't.

I have reached a point at which I am clearly trying to woo your acceptance of my thesis by citing a large number of examples. Obviously, there is some sort of fallacy in my logic if I attempt to pile example upon example to argue that we are obsessed with quantifying information. So I will subdue an urge to quote from an article speculating on how much Jackie Onassis will inherit or one that says we should not think of art in terms of money but a city can't maintain a first-rate symphony orchestra for under five million dollars.

We know, of course, that the ratings that really count for movies,

records, plays, and television appear on the pages of Variety, Billboard and other periodicals that measure the success of a performance by the number of viewers and purchasers and how much money they have paid to be entertained. Thus we have no trouble in recognizing "Towering Inferno", "The Godfather, Part II," "Earthquake", and "Murder on the Orient Express", as having satisfied their accountability because each has grossed over $10 million in less than five months' time.

Is the matter of accountability becoming a more serious problem today? I've tried to demonstrate that the time is opportune for advocates of accountability, and that circumstance makes it a serious problem. Two years ago, the issue of accountability was sufficiently serious to delay the opening of the Detroit schools for two months. It was a terrible experience for kids, but the teachers were able to hold their ground. The most unhappy accountability story I have read recently appears in the March issue of Council-Grams, which is published by NCTE. The story, printed originally in Spectator, the National Association of Elementary School Principals" publication, follows:

> . . . On Test Scores and Accountability
>
> When an Iowa teacher was fired by her school board because her pupils' scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Educational Development were too low, a district court ordered that she be reinstated, arguing that her dismissal was arbitrary and capricious. The U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, however, reversed the lower court, declaring that "such matters as the competence of teachers and the standards of its measurement are not ... matters of constitutional dimensions." The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to review the court of appeals ruling, leaving standing the school-boards' original action.

Alan Purves has observed that in teaching literature engagement is the starting point, without which there is no response. Skills, taste,

attitude, creativity based on literature, all flow from engagement. It seems to me that as a first step we should be willing to be responsible for engaging kids with some kind of literature. We have accepted that job of matchmaker. We can admit too that at this basic level our work can be compared with the job of the car salesmen sitting in the idle showrooms in Detroit and other cities. They too begin by engaging people with their product. But the objectives of the two tasks are incomparably different. Ours is to use that initial engagement as a means of opening the minds of young people to new ideas, opportunities, and attitudes. I firmly believe that we, as English teachers, must preserve our goals and our ways of achieving them, or the day could come when our accomplishments can be tallied on a big scoreboard overlooking an expressway. That is a new dimension of identity I hope we never accept.